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ABSTRACT

Total Quality Management (TQM) is being adopted by many governmental entities, including public school districts. A basic tenet of quality improvement is that the customer, not the organization, defines quality. Other tenets are that the organization must satisfy the customer in order to best the competition; and that the organization must change and develop systemwide practices to manage continuous change and to meet new problems and challenges. Although TQM offers some aspects that may be pertinent and valuable to the management and improvement of governments and schools, independent companies and public institutions have very different missions and obligations. It would be unwise to assume that what works in the private sector will work in the same fashion in the public sector, especially when specific improvement programs are already in place. Other differences are that the customers of public schools are not as well-defined as those of the business world, and these customers often make conflicting demands on schools; the schools' purpose is to prepare students to participate in a pluralistic society; and TQM projects can be manipulated for political gain. (Contains 19 references.) (LMI)

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The Efficacy of Quality Improvement Programs In Education

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ABSTRACT

Many companies in the private sector in the United States have, in the past decade or so, turned to the concept of quality improvement, frequently cited as Total Quality Management (TQM), as a possible answer to the problem of corporate survival in an increasingly competitive world marketplace. In turn, and increasingly so as business leaders show greater interest in and exert greater influence on public agencies, the quality improvement process is now being adopted by many governmental entities, including school districts. One of the basic tenets of quality improvement, which has been called a new paradigm for organizational behavior, is that the customer, not the organization, defines quality. Another , and perhaps more basic one, is the need to satisfy the customer in order to best the competition. Inherent in quality improvement efforts is a belief that organizations must change and develop system-wide practices to manage continuous change and to meet new problems and challenges.

Fundamentally, a relationship between good management practices and organizational performance has always existed. Although TQM or quality improvement has some aspects to it which may be pertinent and valuable to the management and improvement of governments and schools, the fact is independent companies and public institutions have very different missions and obligations and it would be unwise to assume that what works in the private sector should necessarily work in the same fashion in the public sector, particularly when there are specific improvement programs already on-going, as they often are in educational institutions.

Total Quality Management (TQM) or what the Japanese call kai zen, is a process of continuous quality improvement and is most often identified with W. Edwards Deming. Deming developed a summary of how quality improvement should work and this has been used as is, or as modified to fit their particular needs, by a vast number of organizations. The basic principles for quality improvement include managing quality, empowering workers, and continuously improving processes and results. The use of these principles is generally credited with transforming Japanese manufacturing and resulting in the startling economic successes of Japan since the end of World War II.

What started out as a gradual movement to mimic Japanese success by incorporating quality improvement principles into private businesses turned into a rush and quality improvement ideas have now become fairly pervasive throughout all levels of American society and in all types of institutions, almost as if they are a panacea to the plethora of problems that beset society.

Quality improvement was regarded as so important to the future of American ability to compete in the global marketplace that the Federal government enacted Public Law 100-107, The Malcolm Baldridge National Quality Improvement Act of 1987. This Act established annual United States National Quality Awards to promote a broader awareness and to recognize successful implementation of quality improvement in business and in industry.

Jablonski (1991) reported a survey by the American Society for Training and Development, which found that 57 percent of American companies surveyed had quality improvement as a strategic goal or policy and that the rest anticipated doing so within three years. Further, he states, "this important initiative is viewed by many as necessary to remain competitive" (p.2).

In 1989, Governor Bill Clinton of the State of Arkansas, hosted a Governor's Quality Conference and in 1990 began the process of quality improvement in the governmental agencies of that State (New York State Governor's Office of Employee Relations, 1992). Following his election as President of the United States, Clinton brought his enthusiasm for quality improvement to the national level. His administration issued a call to "re-invent" government citing the steps taken by private sector companies in "eliminating unnecessary layers of management, empowering front-line workers, becoming more responsive to their customers and seeking constantly to improve the products they make, the services they provide and the people they employ" (Rosenbaum, 1993,p.B10).

Under quality improvement, workers are supposed to experience new interest, challenges and rewards in their jobs, and quality and customer satisfaction is increased at the same time costs decrease because of new-found efficiencies. Functionally, the management hierarchy is trimmed and teams of motivated employees are to work together collaboratively toward common goals. Trust and open communication within and between work teams is encouraged and employees are given greater control to plan and manage their activities.

Good management and leadership have always been built on trust, delegation of responsibility, setting goals, prioritizing objectives, a free flow of information and evaluating results and correcting errors to improve performance. Bad management could be characterized as appropriating the ideas of subordinates as one's own without giving due credit, micro-managing, lack of vision, crisis management and lack of communication. The quality improvement process will not correct bad management practices if it is employed simply as a means of extracting more from workers without giving tangible rewards in return.

One company that has emphasized quality improvement and employee empowerment, for example, is General Electric (GE). The Chief Executive Officer of GE speaks about "liberating people" and making them "feel good" about being in the company, and says that

"their contributions are respected" (Welch, 1992,p.63). On the other side of the coin, workers union representatives charge that what GE is doing is eliminating managers and "adding tasks to the average worker, who is not getting an added salary but is getting added responsibility and stress" (Ringwald, 1992,p.B3).

Private companies are clearly driven primarily by the profit motive. Serving customers well, improving inefficiencies, and reducing costs would certainly be objectives of such companies in order to increase profit. However, ultimate efficiency is cold and heartless and does not take into consideration human needs. In the drive to increase efficiency and profits, many American workers, managers and line staff alike, have lost their jobs under quality improvement.

Nonetheless, in a time of shrinking revenues, rising workloads and public skepticism concerning the ability of governments to provide services efficiently and economically, governmental entities at all levels--Federal, state and local, have also begun to implement quality improvement programs. Whether this is always appropriate to the purposes of government is, however, questionable. Governments have an obligation to the commonweal and the goods and services they provide are intended to serve the common good. Certain functions such as tax collection and regulatory enforcement may not be fully appreciated but are necessary, and government protection of public health and safety is certainly appropriate.

School Reform and Quality Improvement

School districts, as units of local governments, have been incorporating some of the values of quality improvement in their plans, activities and communications in recent years. These apparent changes and what they represent are touted as a new operative paradigm or way in which school members view their internal and external environments. This quality improvement movement in education has a customer focus and involves all school groups in the decision-making process, as opposed to the traditional hierarchical structure of schools

in which decisions ranging from the vital to the mundane are generally made by administrators. The U.S. Department of Education (1994a) has cited research which supports that "hierarchical management stymies creativity" (p.2) in schools and it has actively encouraged the development of alternative procedures to the traditional structure.

Quality improvement in education might well be subsumed under the broader rubric of school reform. This ongoing school reform can be traced at least as far back as the issuance of A Nation at Risk, a 1983 U.S. Department of Education report on the failings of the U.S. educational system which sparked a number of reform initiatives. These reforms included restructuring of the decision-making processes, closer collaboration with parents and the community, new and different roles for teachers, new curriculum and curricular assessment practices, redesign of staff training, alternative instructional procedures and more efficient use of resources. Many of the reform activities in education which are now allied with quality improvement are recognized movements of their own, such as shared decision making, site or school-based management, outcomes-based education, the effective schools movement, cooperative learning, and others.

These various reform efforts that have been tried have been, however, largely piecemeal changes, not systemic, and they have not been adopted by all schools. To fundamentally change the educational system would require a full-scale restructuring and reform of educational institutions and systems themselves. Increased learning, and creating a more effective learning environment should, of course, be the driving force behind such a wide-spread improvement effort. This would benefit future employers, parents, community and students all "customers" of educational institutions.

Restructuring in education, may or may not mean elimination of some of the administrative layers in the organizational chart but more importantly should result in shared decision making. Cornesby, McCall, Byrnes & Weber (1991) noted that "maximum

autonomy and self-leadership are necessary in educational institutions if a culture of excellence is to result" (p.115). In education, shared decision making and site-based management are two kinds of structural change which can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of decisions by allowing those closest to the problem or situation decide a course of action.

The National Center for School Leadership (1990) at the University of Illinois held a conference at which teams of administrators, parents and teachers from five school districts from different parts of the country reported on their school restructuring and improvement efforts. The conference participants identified several themes common to the experiences of the five different districts:

- Restructuring is a process which requires sustained commitment from many people.
- Good communication between and among participant groups is essential.
- All groups - administrators, parents, teachers and students - must be included in decision-making.
- Risk-taking is a necessary element of restructuring.
- The primary focus should always be on student learning outcomes.

In managing the change efforts in a restructured system, the operating methods, then, are generally collaboration, communication, and flexibility. The new model of a school leader has been described as one who is (a) able to build consensus and trust among individuals and groups, (b) resolve conflict and mediate differences, (c) communicate fully and effectively with all concerned and (d) share the decision making function. For reform to succeed, therefore, there must be real commitment from top level policy-makers and managers.

Communication is particularly important because it links the various members of an organization. Through such interaction, expectations, important events and understandings, and information vital to the efficient operation of the organization is transmitted. People in an organization are thus, "motivated or debilitated, made loyal or disloyal, interested or alienated, by the kind of communication they receive, understand, and finally accept, and by their capacity to interpret communications in terms of their own objectives, interests, needs and desires" (Schneider, Donaghy, and Newman 1975,p.5).

In this context, Mortensen (1972) observed also that communication requires a sensitivity to backgrounds and situations and the atmosphere or ambiance of the setting in which it occurs. Others refer to this as a social or organizational climate. Such climate can be warm, and supportive, friendly or demanding, constraining and stressful.

Support, warmth, consideration and reciprocal confidence and trust were cited by Sanford, Hunt, and Bracey (1976) as some of the characteristics of a supportive climate. Litwin and Stringer (1968) had concluded that support, encouragement and, in general, an appreciation for work well done increases motivation and achievement-oriented activity, whereas warmth and friendliness may merely serve to reduce various work related anxieties and stimulate affiliative concerns rather than influence achievement.

Further, Dunbar (1981) stated that as workers are able to increase their discretion, job interest and productivity can increase and that people who feel they have some control may be highly motivated to take initiatives and to invest the time, effort and resources necessary to ensure success" (p.92). This effect should be applicable to both teachers and students in schools.

Part and parcel of the reform efforts is decreased isolation within the schools, for both teachers and students through a greater use of teams, mentors, peer coaching and peer tutoring, and the diffusion of decision making to actively involve many more people in the

governing and learning processes. Teachers can better have the benefit of support from colleagues and students are able to more realistically use what they learn rather than be passive receivers of information. There may then be greater opportunities for all to grow in a community of learners and doers. Improvement, then, should ideally become continuous for both teachers and students.

Whether called outcomes based or competency-based education, the mastery learning approach has been called "a natural tool of TQM" (Byrnes, Cornesby, and Byrnes, 1992,p.34). The fundamental idea is that a certain amount of student learning needs to be demonstrated, that some students will grasp concepts more quickly than others and that students are empowered by becoming more involved in and responsible for their own learning. Guskey (1986) reported on a study in which teachers using mastery learning methods found that "their students attained higher scores on course examinations and earned higher course grades than students in their other class sections were mastery learning procedures were not employed" (p.8).

The stigma of failure might be removed where the traditional grading system, which in essence pits students against each other in competition, is not used. Rather, students are encouraged to help each other achieve learning successes, often by working in teams, a practice called cooperative learning. However, this has its limits because as often happens if everyone is responsible for an outcome, then no one is and yet personal responsibility is still important.

In a TQM learning environment, the teacher is more of a supervisor, helping students do a better job of learning. The quality teacher, according to Byrnes, Cornesby and Byrnes (1992), allows students to also be more active participants in setting up classroom processes and procedures. There are, of course, many possible ways to learn. The results or outcomes are most important, not autocratic teacher control of how learning is to take place (lecture

method, homework assignments, group recitation, etc.).

Tucker (1993) noted that the key to improving performance in schools is to set clear goals for student achievement, to measure progress toward them accurately and to hold teachers accountable for student performance. He also believes that "establishing properly structured incentives for students and faculty" (p.33) would result in an effective school system.

In an exploration of approaches to school-based management in three countries, Wohlstetter and Mohrman (Consortium for Policy Research in Education, 1994) found that in Victoria, Australia, school subcommittees had control over funds and in Edmonton, Canada and Prince William County, Maryland, schools were rewarded for being frugal by having discretion over the use of cost savings. It was also found that a lack of financial rewards for effort could impede success.

Schools often rely on more intrinsic rewards such as increased job satisfaction and token awards and certificates of appreciation or public praise. In many instances, this is because contractual salary agreements with teacher unions preclude the awarding of additional merit pay to individual teachers. Realistically, these limitations could seriously impede progress toward widespread quality improvement in education.

Kentucky was the first State to attempt a systemic restructuring of its schools, and the U.S. Department of Education has cited the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 as providing "lessons on enacting systemic reform for policy makers and educators in other states" (USDOE,1994b,p.5). It should be noted that in addition to making schools largely self-governing through the adoption of a school-based decision making process, a key provision of the Act is financial rewards for improvement or sanctions for declining performance. Indeed, it was reported that nowhere else in the country were penalties forced on weak performing schools (Walters, 1991).

Conclusion

It is axiomatic that efforts to improve are almost constant in education. The impetus may come from different directions and the various efforts may over-lap in time and complement or supplement one another. Although quality improvement has the potential to improve education, to say that this one philosophy or process is the answer to the problems besetting education is either naive or duplicitous.

Service to customers is a basic tenet of TQM and quality improvement and in the business world customers are more easily recognized and a business that does not satisfy its' customers may well go out of business in time.

The customers of schools, particularly government-supported schools, are not as well defined and in fact different customers can make conflicting demands on the schools. Certain taxpayers and companies want the costs of education reduced and various political groups have their own narrow agendas for education; yet at the same time other businesses demand better trained graduates and parents and students are often most interested in the acquisition of a superior education and useful employment skills. In addition to balancing these demands, an overarching purpose of government schools in a democracy is to also prepare students to be participative citizens in a pluralistic society, which is a less tangible but vital objective.

TQM or quality improvement concepts have other limitations as well. Collaboration and teamwork aside, and even though it is certainly wise to solicit a wide range of opinion, policy makers and administrators cannot abrogate their responsibility and need to make decisions on a timely basis or to be accountable for them. Given this, TQM or quality improvement can in practice all too easily eventually become or be seen as just another form of worker exploitation or co-optation, particularly so if there was no real commitment to its basic principles from the management level.

If, in the face of dwindling resources for education greater economy is required, an expanded use of technology as in distance learning and more individualized computer-assisted instruction; a greater use of teacher aides and volunteers to do routine tasks; differentiated staffing and salary scales to include master teachers and teacher assistants; and greater use of adjunct professors in colleges might be effective ways of increasing efficiency. Fostering competition is also a way of forcing greater efficiency and perhaps greater effectiveness. Education vouchers, charter schools and other experiments in school choice would certainly put more pressure on all schools to perform better or suffer the consequences. The logic of making choices available, including to low-income families, is that parents and students will choose the better performing schools, whether public or private. Schools that perform poorly should then strive to improve in order to compete effectively for students. But, would such approaches and others serve all of the basic purposes of education equally well? There might well be less overall stability, greater political influences and greater segregation by race, religion and economic class.

TQM and quality improvement concepts can also be manipulated by politicians and managers as, for example, in the awarding in 1992 of the New York State Excelsior award for excellence in quality improvement to the Kenmore-Tonawanda School District. Possessing the world's ninth largest economy, and in recognition of the need to stay competitive, New York State imitated the Federal awards for quality improvement beginning in 1992 with its own Excelsior Awards in three categories--the private sector, the public sector, and education. The first award in education was to Kenmore-Tonawanda, a suburban School District of 8,000 students outside of the City of Buffalo. The award to this school district, however, serves to illustrate that there have always been well-run schools as well as poorly-run schools, since the quality improvement efforts at Kenmore-Tonawanda were begun well before TQM came into wide usage.

In a Leadership Forum on Quality in Education designed to "spread the faith" about TQM in education, it was revealed by school officials (Helfrich, 1993) that the basis for Kenmore-Tonawanda's success was its long-term participation in a School Improvement Program beginning in 1981. In other words, the citation of this School District as an example of how TQM can result in school improvement was a fabrication. The improvement efforts had been on-going for over a decade, but under another name, and these were so well recognized that the District had hosted visiting educators from Canada, Germany, Yugosalvia, India, Ceylon, Japan and Thailand during that period of time. That is another lesson to be learned - that school improvement takes a lot of hard work over a long time and that the mere invocation of the jargon, the giving of lip service to improvement efforts or the anointing of on-going improvement efforts by a catch phrase such as TQM does not in itself result in meaningful change.

The new paradigm in education, as elsewhere, may not necessarily be a new focus or a new philosophy or a new process but rather simply an understanding of the fact that in the future there will be an accelerated pace of change, and less stability for all types of organizations and institutions. In such an environment, the capacity to quickly and successfully adjust to change will be critical to survival. Basic good management practices and improvement in individual work performance or results under such circumstances should, the same as always, be recognized and appropriately rewarded.

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